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JURY FINDS TILLIS GUILTY OF FIRST-DEGREE MURDER IN DEATH OF JONI GUNTER

State Attorney Melissa Nelson today announces that Russell Tillis, of Jacksonville, was found guilty by a jury of First-Degree Murder, Kidnapping, and Abuse of a Dead Human Body. Tillis now faces the death penalty with a minimum sentence of mandatory life in prison. The Honorable Mark Borello will conduct a penalty hearing beginning April 14, 2021.

In February 2016, members of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Cold Case Unit were alerted that an inmate incarcerated in the Duval County Jail had admitted to the murder, dismemberment, and burial of a woman in 2015 at his Southside home. Tillis' confession to another inmate was captured on a surveillance wire and a search warrant was granted to search Tillis' residence. The search resulted in the discovery of four holes in Tillis' backyard, where a set of female remains were found. An autopsy and forensic investigation determined the cause of death to be blunt force head trauma and the manner of death as homicide. DNA testing and further forensic analysis revealed that the remains belonged to 30-year-old Joni Gunter. Tillis was subsequently arrested and charged with Gunter's murder and other crimes.

The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and prosecuted by Assistant State Attorneys Alan Mizrahi and Erin Wolfson.